National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform

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INTENSIVE LIFE COACHING: A COMMUNITY VIOLENCE INTERVENTION APPROACH

OVERVIEW

Most community violence intervention (CVI) organizations include street outreach and violence interruption/mediation programs. These programs are essential to preventing the immediate escalation of conflicts and cycles of retaliation. Many of these programs do not include a robust case management component. Even when case management is involved, it is often focused on service brokering.

Intensive life coaching is another essential component of CVI. Intensive life coaching is not only case management, but more importantly, building a positive and trusting relationship with a participant, and helping them make better decisions.

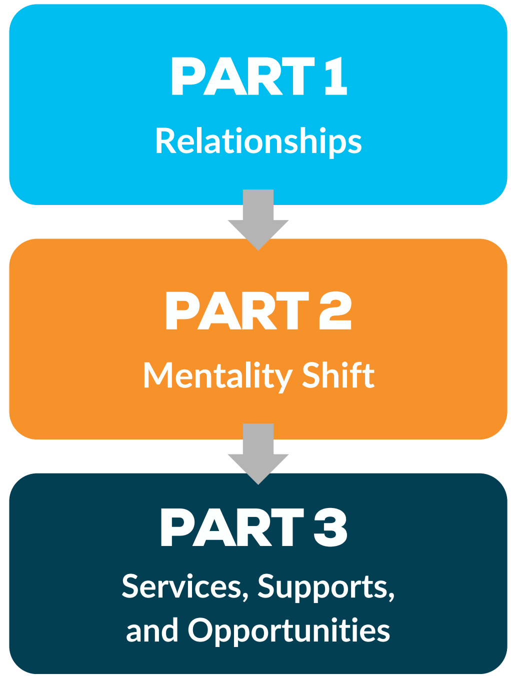
The National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR) has developed Intensive Life Coaching as a critical aspect of its Gun Violence Reduction Strategy (GVRS). NICJR provides comprehensive training, technical assistance, and support for the development, implementation, and success of Life Coaching programs within GVRS.

Intensive Life Coaches are primarily responsible for helping to reduce gun violence in their city. They are assigned to work with the youth and/or young adults who have been identified as being at very high risk for being involved in gun violence. Life Coaches work primarily with young men aged 18–35 who have extensive criminal justice involvement, are members of crews or gangs, and who often have been victimized by gun violence in the past and/or have close friends or family members who have been shot recently. Life Coaches are expected to establish trusting relationships with the participants on their caseload and spend significant time with them, eventually connecting them to needed services, supports, and opportunities.

Life Coaches employ the two most essential elements of GVRS: specificity and intensity. They are specifically focused on the small number of individuals who are at very high risk and engage them intensively. Intensive Life Coaches should have small caseloads, ideally of no more than 8 participants, with 10 being the absolute maximum. Life Coaches are responsible for communicating with each participant every single day and having in-person engagement with each participant 2–4 times per week.

NICJR's three-part theory of change for intensive life coaching includes: 1) relationships; 2) mentality shift; and 3) services, supports, and opportunities.

Relationships



Many people who are at very high risk for violence are hesitant to engage in services, as they are accustomed to being failed by systems and service providers. Often these individuals have been connected to service providers off and on for many years, but with no deep, sustained relationships or real change. Recognizing this, the Life Coach focuses first and foremost on gaining each participant's trust through meaningful, frequent contact, also known as "relentless pursuit." Crucially, the Life Coach should be a credible messenger—someone from the same community and/or who has similar life experiences as the participant.

Mentality Shift

Once an individual has engaged in life coaching, the Life Coach uses their relationship, motivational interviewing, and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to shift them away from a negative and violent mentality; increase motivation; and influence better, safer, and healthier decisions. Each participant should also be connected to a CBT program such as Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise (HWW), a culturally relevant, trauma-informed CBT group program where participants explore decision making, their purpose and identity, overcoming trauma, and life skills in the company of their peers. As participants make better decisions, they achieve improved outcomes, including educational and employment accomplishments and reductions in violence and justice system involvement.

Services, Supports, and Opportunities

The Life Coach collaborates with the participant and, when possible, their family, to develop a detailed Life Plan identifying the needs and challenges of the participant as well as improvement goals in those areas. Participant-centered goals are often related to education, employment, housing, and other specialized needs such as mental health and substance abuse treatment. The Plan also details which services, supports, and opportunities the Life Coach will directly connect the participant with to achieve Life Plan goals. The Life Coach does not simply provide referrals to service providers, but personally connects the participant to programs they know and trust. To promote engagement, the participant also receives financial incentives for achieving milestones such as maintaining contact with their Life Coach. Financial incentives are critical tools to engage hard-to-reach individuals and have proven effective in violence reduction programs. (See Intensive Life Coaching Incentive Program appendix for further details).

INTENSIVE LIFE COACHING PHASES

Phase One: Relationship Building (first 3–4 months on the caseload)

The first phase of intensive life coaching focuses on building a positive and trusting relationship with the participant. During this time, the Life Coach should spend as much time as possible with the participant, getting to know them; developing an understanding of where they come from, what motivates them, and what their likes and dislikes are; and generally building a positive relationship. This time should primarily be spent in the neighborhood and in the home of the participant, though some of this can also occur at the office. The Life Coach should also meet and establish a good rapport with the participant's family, significant other, and friends during this time.

The other primary goal of Phase 1 is helping the participant make good decisions that keep them safe and not engaged in violence. Participants should be invited and encouraged to attend a cognitive behavioral therapy program during this phase.

The Life Coach should also develop a Life Plan with the participant during this first phase. However, there is not a strong expectation that much progress will be made in achieving milestones during this time, as this phase is primarily focused on relationship building.

The first phase must be at least three months but could last up to four months and, in some rare cases, longer.

Phase 1 Engagement Requirements:

- **Daily communication.** The Life Coach communicates with the participant through daily phone calls and text messages, to ensure ongoing support and connection.
- **In-person contact.** The Life Coach meets with the participant three to four times per week, whether at home, in the neighborhood, or at the office. These face-to-face interactions deepen the relationship and provide opportunities for personalized guidance and support.

Phase Two: Stabilization (months 3–7 on the caseload)

The second phase of the life coaching process focuses on maintaining frequent contact, solidifying the positive and trusting relationship between the Life Coach and participant, and beginning to make progress on Life Plan milestones.

During this phase, the Life Plan should become more of a focus as the Life Coach works with the participant to achieve gains in employment and education, maintain stable housing, and connect to any needed services such as mental health care and substance abuse treatment. The Life Coach should provide an overview of the life planning process—including the importance of setting meaningful goals, identifying obstacles, and developing strategies for overcoming challenges—and then facilitate open dialogue with the participant that focuses on development and achievement of the Life Plan.

Participants are expected to attend a CBT program during this phase.

Phase 2 Engagement Requirements:

- **Daily communication.** The Life Coach communicates with the participant through daily phone calls and text messages, to ensure ongoing support and connection.
- **In-person contact.** The Life Coach meets with the participant at least two times per week, whether at home, in the neighborhood, or at the office. These face-to-face interactions deepen the relationship and provide opportunities for personalized guidance and support.

Phase Three: Transitioning to Success (months 6–18 on the caseload)

The first few months of Phase 3 may mirror Phase 2. Some participants may make steady progress and be ready for transition in months 9–12 of the intensive life coaching program, while other participants may continue to be at very high risk and exhibit behaviors and needs that warrant continued engagement for up to 18 months.

During the third phase, the Life Coach should emphasize holding the participant accountable for their actions and decisions while also empowering them to take ownership of their journey toward stability and self-improvement. This may involve setting clear expectations, celebrating achievements, and providing constructive feedback.

Participants are expected to be either employed or in school full time in this phase. Participants should also graduate from their CBT program in Phase 3.

At the end of Phase 3, the participant should graduate from the program, and they should be celebrated and rewarded for this significant achievement. The Life Coach should also transition the participant to another long-term service provider, such as a mentoring program, so they can receive ongoing support.

Phase 3 Engagement Requirements:

- **Regular communication.** The Life Coach communicates with the participant through calls and text messages three to four times each week, to ensure ongoing support and connection.
- **In-person contact.** The Life Coach meets with the participant at least once per week, whether at home, in the neighborhood, or at the office. These face-to-face interactions deepen the relationship and provide opportunities for personalized guidance and support.

APPENDICES

Intensive Life Coaching Incentive Program

Modest financial incentives, when paired with relentless pursuit, are an effective strategy to engage and retain very high-risk participants.

After a very high-risk individual is identified and has been engaged either through a Direct Communication process or through other outreach efforts, an initial gift card between $50–$100 should be offered to meet with a Life Coach. In Oakland, after a very high-risk person attends a Call-In or receives a Custom Notification, they are offered a gift card of either $50 or $100 to meet with a Life Coach within 48 hours.

Once a very high-risk individual meets with a Life Coach and agrees to enroll in life coaching, they should be eligible for a monthly incentive for achieving certain milestones. The milestones should be both basic and significant, like maintaining constant contact with the Life Coach ($50), attending a CBT group ($25), applying for a job ($50), starting a new job ($100), graduating from a CBT program ($100), etc. In Oakland, a life coaching participant is eligible to earn up to $350 per month for up to 18 months. In Richmond, CA, Peacemaker Fellows can earn up to $1,000 for adhering to their specific Life Plan.

At the end of each month, the Life Coach completes an Incentive Form indicating the milestones achieved that month by the participant and the incentive amount for each achievement. The Life Coach must also provide documentation for each achievement. For instance, if an incentive is paid for maintaining employment, check stubs should be included with the incentive form, or if an incentive is being given for complying with probation, an email or text message from the Probation Officer acknowledging compliance that month should be provided.

By the fifth day of each month, the incentive stipend should be paid to the participant for the previous month, either by gift card or check. Paying in checks can be less expensive to the program, and it can encourage the participant to open a bank account—an activity the Life Coach can undertake with them.

Life Coaching Supervisor Duties

- Ensure that all Life Coaches under your supervision are carrying out their responsibilities in accordance with their position description and assigned duties.
- Be available to your staff at all times during working hours to answer questions, resolve challenges, and provide support.
- Coach and encourage your staff to be their best, be professional, and carry out all of their responsibilities.
- Correct, admonish, and discipline staff if they engage in inappropriate behavior or are not fulfilling their duties after receiving coaching.
- Conduct one-on-one meetings with each Life Coach on your team (weekly preferable, twice a month minimally).
    - Review every individual on their caseload, provide guidance on how they can best support the participant, and check that they are having frequent enough contact with each participant.
    - Review paperwork to ensure it is being completed correctly.
    - Address any issues or challenges.
- Team Meetings (weekly).
    - Go over any needed organizational business matters.
    - Share announcements.
    - Provide any needed support, morale boosting, etc. for Life Coaches.
    - Include professional development time.
- Case Conference (weekly).
- Monthly Field Visits (ride-alongs, every month).
    - Go out with each Life Coach under your supervision individually to observe them interacting with and engaging the participant.
    - This visit should be in the field, not in the office.
- File Review (monthly).
    - This may be combined with one of the bi-weekly one-on-one meetings.
    - Review each participant's case folder.
    - Review daily logs.
    - Review case notes (there should be a case note for every contact a Life Coach has had with a participant, so there should be daily case notes on each participant).
    - Transition case notes to electronic files when your data management system is up and running.

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